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(Koṭi,gāma) Sammā Sambuddha Sutta

The (Koṭi,gāma) Discourse on the Fully Self-awakened | S 56.23
or Ce **Abhisambuddha Sutta** the Discourse on the Directly Self-awakened

Theme: An arhat has direct knowledge of the 4 truths

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The (Koṭi,gāma) **Sammā Sambuddha Sutta** (S 56.23) is a short discourse on what defines **the Buddha**. He is one who “on account of his direct state of self-awakening (*abhisambuddhatta*) to the 4 noble truths, according to true reality” [§3]. What is highlighted here is that the Buddha is one who fully understands the nature of true reality. He does not proclaim the truths or teachings of some “higher being or reality,” but declares to us his awakening so that we, too, can know and see for ourself that very same true reality. That true reality is defined in the 4 noble truths.

1.2 THE ARHAT

1.2.1 The 4 truths. The (Koṭi,gāma) **Sammā Sambuddha Sutta** should be studied with **the (Koṭi,gāma) Arahanta Sutta**, the Koṭi,gāma Discourse on the Arhat (S 56.24). This Sutta (S 56.24) states that the buddhas of the 3 times—the past, the present and the future—fully awaken to the same 4 noble truths. They penetrate into the same truth and see the same true reality.

1.2.2 The 3 characteristics

1.2.2.1 Philosophically, the 4 noble truths can be reflected on as **the 3 characteristics** of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. All the buddhas [1.2.1] full understand the universal nature of true reality, defined as the 3 characteristics (*ti,lakkhaṇa*), that is,

All conditioned things are impermanent.
All conditioned things are unsatisfactory
All dharmas [principles] are non-self.

sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā
sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā
sabbe dhamma anattā

(Dh 277-279); SD 26.8 (1.1.2)

1.2.2.2 The primary truth and reality that all thinkers, systems and religions are likely to agree on is that everything in this world is impermanent. Whatever exists must exist in time; hence, whatever exists is impermanence. To say that anyone or anything or whatever that “exists” or is “real” to be eternal is a contradiction in terms. We can declare that there was once a “unicorn,” or that in a land far away, there *is* a unicorn. It does not mean that it exists; it is merely fiction. When we take what is non-existent as existing, what is unreal to be real—this is **delusion**. In this sense, most of religion was and is delusion.¹

1.2.2.3 Whatever is impermanent must change, become other (*vipariṇāmati aññathā hoti*)²—hence, it is **unsatisfactory**, it brings suffering, physical and mental.³ This means that we may plan and propose, but karma and nature will unplan and dispose. Time clouds us in a mist of forgetting; we step just ahead

¹ On the corollaries of conditionality, see SD 49.8b (7.1.6).

² **Uddesa Vibhaṅga S** (M 138,20) SD 33.14.

³ See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,12-16), SD 1.2.

or perhaps a step back; then, we lose sight of both; time has flown. And so we wander on in our misty path. And we wonder: what was I, what will I be, what am I? Only time will tell, but it never does.

Suffering means that we can be perfect but not yet. We are still the slaves and victims of time: changing, becoming other; there's nothing we can do about it. We pretend to enjoy the moment, lose ourself in the moment's pleasures, but then we must still face the emptiness and hollowness of it all—that we are hollow men, hollow women, trying to fill ourselves. Since we *are not*, we never can *have*. When we want something, we see it as alien to us, outside of us.

Joy arises not from things without but from the peace within. Only when we are at peace with ourself that joy arises like a lotus from the mud of our mind. Then, we are happy. We are happy because we are free from the chains of lust and hate, and we clearly see true peace boundlessly.

1.2.2.4 The Greek philosopher Leucippus (died 370 BCE) and his student Democritus (born c460 BCE)⁴ thought that the final tiniest state of matter was the “atom” (from Greek *atomos*, “uncuttable”). Imagine we are cutting a piece of bread; we go on cutting it into halves, infinitely, until the tiniest bit that cannot be cut any more—that is the “atom,” the element of which all things are ultimately composed.

In 1808, the English scientist, John Dalton, noticing that distilled water comprised of the same elements, hydrogen and oxygen, concluded that “the ultimate particles of all homogeneous bodies are perfectly alike in weight, figure, etc.” Further, he concluded that there must be a unique atom for each element, using the French scientist, Lavoisier's definition of an element as a substance that could not be analyzed into something simpler.

In 1917, New Zealand scientist Ernest Rutherford “split the atom” in a nuclear reaction. In 1919, he was able to transmute nitrogen into oxygen at the University of Manchester. The end of the atomic idea ushered in to the age of quantum physics, that allows for particles to be in two states at the same time. Light, for example, can be understood as “waves” of energy or as “particles” of energy. Quantum physics interestingly states that a scientific observer actually changes or affects whatever is observed.⁵

1.2.2.5 The closest that Buddhist philosophy came to such a view of atoms is in the teaching of **the 4 primary elements** (*mahā, bhūta, rūpa*). The “final state” of “matter” (more “things” in general than the western idea) is fourfold:

“earth”	<i>paṭhavī</i>	solidity: resistance, roughness, smoothness, etc
“water”	<i>āpo</i>	fluidity: coherence, attraction of basic elements
“fire”	<i>tejo</i>	fire: decay, oxidation, digestion, combustion, etc
“wind”	<i>vāyo</i>	wind: movement, peristalsis, bodily gases, etc

Hence, this is not the same as western “atomism,” since early Buddhism rejects any idea of some kind of ultimate or transcendental “essence.” The idea of the 4 elements are close to regarding the state of “matter” as being dynamically unstable, one element or state transforming into another and intermingling. We cannot at any point take a photo of it, freeze-frame and say, “That's it.” It's just *not* it. This is one way to understand the early Buddhist teaching of **non-self** (*anattatā*).⁶

1.2.2.6 Of **the 3 characteristics**—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self—the first two fit into the very 1st noble truth—that of suffering. **Impermanence** is the universal characteristic of all exist-

⁴ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/>. Accessed 25 Aug 2018.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiAj7S6ko9Q>.

⁶ See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,3-11), SD 1.2. On whether buddhas arise or not, Dharma exists as the 3 characteristics, see **Dhamma,niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8.

ence--all conditioned things (whatever there is in this universe) is in a state of flux or is relative to a state of flux. Hence, it is simply **suffering**—we experience a range of unsatisfactoriness—when we try to find some way of “holding” an event, of “fixing” a state, that we find pleasant, or even of seeing anything in a manner that permanently fits our view or bias.

The desire for such a hold, fix or view is that powerful drive of either wanting to freeze the moment or to swallow up an experience so that it fills what we seem to lack—this is called **craving** (*taṇhā*), an insatiable thirst for having and being, to have and to be. What we think we *lack*, want to have; what we think we *like* we want to be. This is the 2nd noble truth.

In the earliest arrangement of the 4 noble truths, the **path** (the noble eightfold path) is the 3rd noble truth. This is logical, since moving on the path leads to awakening or nirvana, which comes last and 4th.⁷ The journey on the path begins with truly understanding and accepting the characteristic and truth of impermanence. As we begin to understand more fully, we see clearly how it is related to suffering. Finally, we are able to relate both to the characteristic and reality of non-self as the principle underlying all conditioned things.

The characteristic of **non-self** is the principle underlying all the 4 truths, but it is most obvious, easiest to see and this leads us to penetrate as the 3rd noble truth—that of **nirvana**. But nirvana is neither self nor non-self; it is unconditioned and thus has no characteristic. Penetrating into the principle of non-self marks the end of our journey on the path of awakening—there is no more movement; the stopping and stillness is total spiritual consummation. This is nirvana.

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(Koṭi,gāma) Sammā Sambuddha Sutta

The (Koṭi,gāma) Discourse on the Fully Self-awakened

S 56.23

1 At Sāvattthī.

The 4 noble truths

2 Bhikshus, there are these 4 noble truths. What are the four?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| (1) The noble truth that is | suffering. |
| (2) The noble truth that is | the arising of suffering. |
| (3) The noble truth that is | the ending of suffering. |
| (4) The noble truth that is | the path leading to the end of suffering. |

These, bhikshus, are the 4 noble truths.

⁷ On the arrangement of the 4 noble truths as 1-2-4-3, see **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4).

Why the Buddha is so called

3 Bhikshus, it is on account of his direct state of self-awakening to the 4 noble truths, according to true reality, that the Tathagata is called **the arhat [worthy], the fully self-awakened**.⁸

Reflection on the truths

4 Therefore, bhikshus,
 You should devote yourself (to the reflection):⁹ “This is suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the arising of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the ending of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.”

— evaṃ —

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⁸ *Imesaṃ kho bhikkhave catunnaṃ ariya,saccānaṃ yathā,bhūtaṃ abhisambuddhattā tathāgato araham̐ sammā,sambuddho’ti vuccati.*

⁹ *Idaṃ dukkhan’ti yogo karaṇīyo.*